

CHECKMATE

By PHILIP MAY

The sands stretched into infinity. Constant winds blew them in all directions, and countless new shapes. The biting of the sand into the eyes blurred all vision. Combined with the strange aura of timelessness, it was like being in a dream. Or a nightmare.

Dotted around in the sand were thousands of bones, giving the place the atmosphere of a graveyard. Half the bones were as white as pure snow, untainted by any darker colours. The other half couldn't be more different. They were as black as tar. As black as the hearts of the people to whom they once belonged.

We have black hearts.

Half the desert was in darkness. No matter where light shone, all shadows fell there. These planes of sand were more than they seemed. They were a battleground for the two main forces in the universe - good and evil. It was also where a gateway existed between dimensions, those of light and shadow. A battle had not occurred for some time, but one was now imminent.

*The ancient enemies shall
seek each other out.*

To the Time Lord, his opponent was hideous. Everything about it was evil. Indeed, it was the embodiment of evil itself, born in the same fires as the universe itself. Evil has no name, but if it did, it would be Fenric.

"Life is but a dream, Time Lord!" cried Fenric, its arms wide. "This has no effect on me!"

"Fenric - this no dream," replied his white-haired opponent. "It is reality!"

Evil. Evil since the Dawn of Time.

The Time Lord stood to his full height and gazed into Fenric's cruel, burning eyes. What he had to do was very dangerous, based on a flimsy supposition. At best, his move was a desperate gamble. But then all the Time Lord's moves were. Still, every move had to be made. This Time Lord was the only one of his kind who could make them.

He plucked bones from the sands, and began to carve them into chess pieces. Eventually, there was a full set. The Time Lord's pieces were white, in the shape of humanoids. All but one had perfectly formed faces. The Queen's was left blank. Fenric's pieces were black, carved into the shape of figures with grotesquely deformed faces. They screamed out with sadness.

Time for one final game.

The chequered pattern of a chessboard was then carefully etched into the sands. Upon the board, the pieces were placed in a certain pattern, conceived by the Time Lord. One move, the only move possible, would make Black the victor. It seemed so simple.

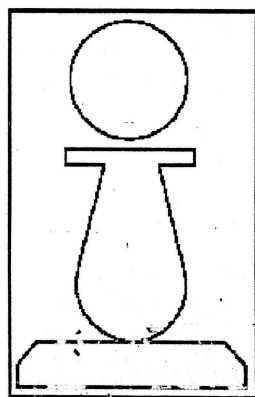
For what seemed like forever, Fenric stared at the chessboard with intense concentration. Gradually its body began to weaken, and eventually slid to the ground, decaying as it did so. Soon all that was left was a pile of charred, blackened bones. They vanished into a green shadow - Fenric's evil spirit. And then this too was gone, drawn towards the Shadow Dimensions, to be trapped eternally.

The Time Lord gazed at the chessboard and thought of the solution to his puzzle. The black and white pawns should have joined forces. Fenric, with its black mind and heart, could not conceive that soldiers on opposite sides could fight together. The gamble had worked.

Checkmate.

The Time Lord kicked over the chess pieces, and rubbed out the chequered etchings. Around him, the landscape shimmered, changing from a sterile desert into a beautiful, fertile field. At the Time Lord's feet lay a shapeless white decanter. Even as he picked it up, he could sense the mysterious and evil forces within.

Black wins.



**THE
END
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